



*the committee for the study of
desert alchemy*

THE UNDERCOMMONS
FUGITIVE PLANNING & BLACK STUDY

STEFANO HARNEY & FRED MOTEN

**7. A GENERAL ANTAGONISM:
AN INTERVIEW WITH STEVPHEN SHUKAITIS**

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The image is a dark, high-contrast, grainy photograph of a tree trunk. The trunk is the central focus, showing its rough, textured bark. A horizontal line, possibly a branch or a cut, runs across the upper portion of the trunk. The lighting is dramatic, with deep shadows and bright highlights, creating a stark, almost abstract appearance. The overall mood is somber and textured.

THE GENERAL ANTAGONISM:
AN INTERVIEW WITH
STEPHEN SHUKAITIS

STEPHEN: I'd like to start our conversation in a somewhat playful, metaphoric manner, with an idea from Selma James that I recently came across. Selma was describing the advice that CLR James gave her for writing: that she should keep a shoebox, collecting in it various ideas and thoughts. When the shoebox was getting filled she would have all that was needed for writing. If you were to introduce someone to your collaborative work through the form of a conceptual shoebox, what would be in it? What would be in there?

FRED: The thing I felt when I read that was, if I were Selma James, I would ask to get clarification on what he meant. The one thing I do that's similar is that I carry around little notebooks and I jot things down all the time. If I don't have my notebooks, I write notes on pieces of paper and stick them in my pocket. What's funny is that I don't think of it as a shoebox, because 95% of the time I write stuff down and that's the end of it. It's more that I have a thought and I write it down and then I never think about it again. Seldom do I even transcribe into the computer.

The one thing that I was interested in about the question, it strikes me, especially in thinking about working collaboratively, with Stefano, you sort of don't need a shoebox in a way, because I always feel like, when I'm asleep, he's up thinking about something. And also, working so closely with my wife, Laura, it's not as much having a

critique of the administered world, or some knowledge of the administered self, and one of them is Papa's skylark.

shoebox in which I'm writing down my thoughts as that I'm having a long conversation with a few people. What I'm trying to say is that the content of the box is less important for me than the ongoing process of talking with somebody else, and the ideas that emerge. So, I don't feel like there are five or six ideas that I'm always working on and thinking about that I can pull out of my box. It's more like there are five or six people that I'm always thinking with. If you ask me, I couldn't tell you, 'oh there are these four or five ideas that I'm constantly going back to that I have to have in my box.' It doesn't feel that way. It feels more like there are one or two things that I've been talking about with people forever. And the conversation develops over the course of time, and you think of new things and you say new things. But, the ideas that are stuck in my head are usually things that somebody else said.

STEFANO: It's hard for me to answer because I'm a person who doesn't make notes on what I read, because I just know I'm not going to go back to them. I'm not a collector in that way. But, I also feel like there's something there; it's not necessarily a box, but perhaps as Fred says, a series of conversations. What's also interesting to me is that the conversations themselves can be discarded, forgotten, but there's something that goes on beyond the conversations which turns out to be the actual project. It's the same thing I think in the building of any kind of partnership or collectivity: it's not the thing that you do; it's the thing that happens while you're doing it that becomes important, and the work itself is some combination of the two modes of being. Or to put it in the way of *the shipped*, it's not the box that's important but the experiment among the *un/contained*.

STEPHEN: Perhaps the shoebox metaphor was more useful for Selma in the sense that she was more cut off from social contact and was trying to write by herself, and trying to think in isolation, which has its own risks and downfalls. Reading through the texts you've written together, there is a certain set of concepts that you both develop and work with in ways that are somewhat idiosyncratic – perhaps they are the products of this ongoing dialogue that you have had for years, can you explain how these particular concepts have emerged from that?

STEFANO: I could list for you some of our concepts such as ‘under-commons’ or ‘planning’ or the ones we’ve been working with lately, around unsettling and the shipped. But, in a way, I feel like what I’m exploring with Fred, and what I would explore in other situations which aren’t as developed but have been tried, for instance, with the collective at Queen Mary, University of London, is this: the concepts are ways to develop a mode of living together, a mode of being together that cannot be shared as a model but as an instance. So, I feel more like an ‘idea thief’ around this, as Guattari would say – I am hacking concepts and squatting terms as a way to help us do something. Which is not to say that we don’t spend a lot of time developing and trying to make sense of these concepts or trying to figure out how new situations or circumstances might lead us to want to continue the concept, or on the other hand to say the term is no longer sufficient for what we’re trying to say here. I’m thinking recently about some stuff that Fred wrote in response to a question of whether the occupations of the Occupy Movement could be understood to be doing something that we were calling ‘planning.’ And Fred said, “yeah, not just planning but also study and also what you may even call ‘black study.’” So that for me was an example of where the concepts were letting us continue to move through different situations. In that sense I suppose they are there for us in some ways, even if I don’t think of them as conceptual in the same way that maybe you would think of concepts more traditionally in philosophy where you have to make a system of them.

FRED: I think that’s right. I feel, in a lot of ways, the fun thing about working collaboratively with someone is that you literally come to terms together. Stefano will point to different things he’s read that I haven’t read, different kinds of experiences that he’s gone through. He’ll take a term that I would never have thought of myself and I’ll find myself totally drawn to the term and want to work with it. There will be other times when I’ll want to do something to the term.

A metaphor popped into my head. You can either talk about it as having a kind of toolbox or also talk about it as having a kind of toy-box. With my kids, most of what they do with toys is turn them into

STEFANO: Where you find the abolition of credit you find study. But you can’t call for the abolition of credit like you hear calls for the abolition of debt because the call to abolish credit is already always going all, it is a call that enacts, that is enacted. In other words, we don’t need anything to get in debt together. We have already a superabundance of mutual debt we don’t want pay, we don’t want to pay, so what why would we call for anything? But we can join in this plenitude and its everyday performance. Moreover by joining perhaps we avoid some of what credit brings and what calls for debt forgiveness bring as unwanted results, from uplift to settlement.

FRED: Yeah, I mean, I love Fanon, but blackness isn’t some thing that he thought of in an apartment with the others who had just arrived at their homelessness or, deeper still, at some knowledge of it. Now, some folks say that blackness is best understood not as a specific set of practices in which the people who are called black engage, because we have to account for the people who are called black but who no longer, or never did, engage in those practices; rather, blackness, they argue, is a project carried out by people whom we call intellectuals insofar as they refute, by way of essentially Hegelian protocols, some essentially Hegelian relegation to the zone in which all one can do is to engage in that specific set of authentic practices which have become, finally, nothing other than a mark of deprivation. My response is, no, the thing about blackness is that it’s broad enough and open enough to encompass, but without enclosing, all of those things – and to suggest that somehow intellectual life exists on some scale on the other side of the so-called authentic is problematic anyway. Because I figure that performances of a certain mode of sociality also already imply the ongoing production of the theory of sociality. I mean, I’m into that, just like I’m into horny old Socrates when he sees some beautiful young boys he just wants to get next to, and they say, “man, come to the palestra because we need to talk about friendship,” and he’s like, “oh yeah, I’ll come.” That’s good too, that lysis that never seems to come to an end – total, complete, but in an unexplained or undecidable completion. What they talk about, that was good too. There’s a bunch of different possible places from which one might approach a

STEFANO: And you have to rehearse, because you're involved in the rehearsal of some other form of being in debt together. When we say that we don't want management, it doesn't mean we don't want anything, that it just sits there and everything's fine. There's something to be done, but it's performative, it's not managerial.

FRED: And the other part of it, which was just as important, was every once in awhile, if you're giving somebody a ride or if they gave you a ride, instead of asking how "much do I owe you?", you would just take some money out of your pocket and say, "put some gas in the car," and get out of the car. See the interplay between those two things. So, the reason why you asked somebody, "how much do I owe you?" is so that you could be engaged in this ritual process of basically disavowing the very idea of 'owe.'

STEFANO: Yeah, exactly. So that you begin to practice, improvise the relationship between necessity and freedom, not on the grounds of owing and credit, but on the grounds of unpayable debt.

FRED: Yep, most of the while, when you had some money, it wouldn't be a discussion. You would just say, "here put some gas in the car," and get out, leaving some money on the seat.

STEFANO: There's a necessity moment in it, but it's in the context of the freedom, rather than the other way around, and this is the only way it could be when we think of ability and need freed of the standpoint and then this is not a distributional politics anymore but an experiment in letting yourself discover new needs in your abilities and new abilities in your needs in the rhythm of, not against, the general antagonism, performed between the two and amongst the many.

FRED: Yeah, and this is why, for me, see I was looking at that, and it was illogical, if you want to call it that, but it was also performative. For me, I'm not saying that's the only form that study takes, but any notion of study that doesn't acknowledge that form of it is not the study that I'm interested in.

props. They are constantly involved in this massive project of pretending. And the toys that they have are props for their pretending. They don't play with them the right way – a sword is what you hit a ball with and a bat is what you make music with. I feel that way about these terms. In the end what's most important is that the thing is put in play. What's most important about play is the interaction. One time we were driving in the car and my kids were playing this game called 'family,' and it's basically that they've created an alternative family and they just talk about what the alternative family is doing. This time, when they had really started enjoying the game, my eldest son looked at me, I could see him through the rearview mirror, and he said, "dad, we have a box, and we're going to let you open this box, and if you open the box, you can enter into our world." That's kind of what it feels like: there are these props, these toys, and if you pick them up you can move into some new thinking and into a new set of relations, a new way of being together, thinking together. In the end, it's the new way of being together and thinking together that's important, and not the tool, not the prop. Or, the prop is important only insofar as it allows you to enter; but once you're there, it's the relation and the activity that's really what you want to emphasize. So, with that said, if somebody's reading our stuff, and they think they can get something out of the term 'planning' or 'undercommons' or 'logisticality,' that's great, but what matters is what they do with it; it's where they take it in their own relations. When people read their stuff it leads people to look up and read ours. That also creates a different kind of relation between us, even if we're not necessarily cognizant of it.

STEFANO: Just pick up a toy...

STEVPHEN: Following on from that I'd like to ask something about how you approach writing together. If concepts are tools for living or toyboxes for playing, when you pick up a text that's finished, unless you've got some special texts that I don't know of, you don't get a sense of the playing or the living usually. What you get a sense of is some finished product where the collectivity animating the work that preceded it – which I would agree with you is the most important thing – somehow gets lost along the way. How do you negotiate that? Or is

there a way to flag up, in a written text, “don’t take this too seriously, go out and play with it”?

STEFANO: Well, one way that I do that is by revising how I say things. So, some people might call my style repetitive, partly because I’m rephrasing things all the time, but also because I’m trying to show that I’m playing with something rather than that it’s finished. If I’m going along in a kind of ‘duh dum duh dum duh dum’ rhyming kind of way in the writing, it’s partly to say that we’re in rehearsal here. And since we’re rehearsing, you might as well pick up an instrument too. So, for me, it must be right there in the writing in some form. It’s not enough to signal it outside the writing, to send the piece out and to say, ‘oh, really this is still open for this or that.’ It has to be somehow in the writing itself that the thing hasn’t closed off. Part of that is that to write with another person is, in a sense, always to keep something open, because you always have the question of, “do they both think that way, who said that?” Instead of worrying about that, I think that’s nice. That means that the text is already open to more than one, in that sense.

FRED: I think that’s right. Sometimes, when you’re listening to somebody, and you’re trying to think about who’s on the left channel and who’s on the right channel. And then you kind of realize that it’s not really that important. You spend all this time trying to figure it out, but then you realize that there’s also this interaction and interplay that’s still going on in the text. It’s not a dead thing. What you listen to or what you’re reading is still moving and still living. It’s still forming.

There’s this thing I was trying to think about last year, teaching *Black Skin, White Masks*, and reading it and recognizing, finally, because I guess I’m kinda slow, that, “ah shit, Fanon went to medical school. This is important.” Then to be fascinated by Fanon’s use of the term ‘lyse,’ lysis. He didn’t write ‘critique’ or even ‘analysis’ but invoked this biochemical process of the breakdown of cells, which, then, experimentalists try to replicate. All of a sudden, reading Fanon means trying to find out what biochemists mean when they say ‘lysis’. What

What is it about adults that’s so distasteful? You see a kid on the street or in your house, you know you’re supposed to feed them, right? And then that same kid hits eighteen and all of a sudden you say, “I’m not feeding you.” What’s so vulgar and gross and smelly and distasteful about the average adult that you wouldn’t just assume that he should get something to eat? I mean, you’ve gotta be sick to come up with something like that. I mean, who’s the worst person in the world? Even he should have something to eat.

STEFANO: Given that, when you start to talk about this other kind of debt, you’re talking about a history of aesthetics, a history of love, a history of organization, it’s not merely about what you want to abolish – which is credit – but it’s also about what you want to live in and how you want to live in it. And that’s because the real debt, the big debt, the wealth that Marx is talking about, is precisely that: it’s wealth. So, you want to figure out some way that that wealth can be enjoyed. And that’s not by managing it, because managing it is the first step to accounting for it, attributing it or distributing it. It’s about developing some way of being with each other, and of not thinking that that requires the mediation of politics. But, it requires elaboration, it requires improvisation, it requires a kind of rehearsal. It requires things. It’s just that it doesn’t require accounting or management. It requires study.

FRED: Man, I remember being little, being in Arkansas with my grandparents. My grandfather would give somebody a ride like 80 miles from our little town to another little town in his little 1969 green Buick Skylark. And there was this whole ritual process that would occur, and it had a couple of different parts to it. One part would be that somebody, my grandpa, would give you a ride, and before they’d get out of the car, the person would say, “how much do I owe you?” And he’d say, “nothin.” Sometimes he’d feign a kind of, “why would you even ask me some shit like that?” They’d come a whole way just for a certain set of performances. “It don’t mean nothin. Man, get out of this car,” or something like that. But, if somebody got out of the car without asking that shit... He’d be like, “son, don’t be like that.” You have to acknowledge.

about it, it is a sort of filial and essentially a maternal relation. When I say ‘maternal,’ what I’m implying there is the possibility of a general socialisation of the maternal.

But, what’s at stake, it’s like, man, we went to look at this place yesterday, because I’ve got my whole commune plan. It’s like ten acres, way out in the woods. And it’s like a barn. The house is falling apart. I don’t think we can do it. But there was this old lady. She and her husband, they built it how they wanted it to be. She was like, “I don’t want to sell,” but she’s 91 and it’s this kind of big old place, she can’t keep up with it. People were telling us, “she owes her son a hundred thousand dollars.” And me and Laura, driving back, we were like, “how you gonna owe your son a hundred thousand dollars? How do you owe a parent a hundred thousand dollars?” That’s some crazy, barbaric shit. You have to be a barbaric monster to even be able to think of some shit like that. You know what? It’s no more barbaric than owing Wells Fargo Bank a hundred thousand dollars. You think at first glance that it’s barbaric because it appears to violate some sort of notion of filial, maternal relation. But, it’s barbaric because it’s a barbaric way of understanding our undercommon-ness. It’s just particularly blatant because it’s a relation between a mother and son. But, if it were a relation between me and Jamie Dimon, it’s still barbaric. And that’s the problem. So, the abolition of credit, the abolition of the entire way of looking at the world, which let’s say we can place under the rubric of accounting, or accountability, or accountableness, or something, of calculation in that sense – the abolition of that, in a way that David Graeber thinks about it, but without any kind of sense of a return to some originary state of grace, but instead carrying all of what that history has imposed upon us. Hence this argument about where the autonomists got what they got... You know, I love C.L.R. James, but the shit that we now have under his name, was never his private property. Jazz ain’t black people’s private property. And that doesn’t mean that musicians shouldn’t get paid for what they do, within the context of this shit. What I’m really saying when I say that is: anybody who’s breathing should have everything that they need and 93% of what they want – not by virtue of the fact that you work today, but by virtue of the fact that you are here.

might a doctor mean? Then recalling that Plato has a dialogue called *Lysis* that turns and keeps turning on what’s interminable in the analysis or theory of friendship. Fanon’s text is still open and it still opens. Now you have to go inside it. When you’re inside, now, you have to go outside of it. Actually, you’re being blown out of it – this happens within the context of a single authored piece when you realize it’s not a single authored piece. Yeah, it’s under his name, and one might say, of course that what I’m saying is not only simple and true but also mundane. Anybody who understands anything about reading will come to know this; “yeah, that’s intertextuality.” But, there’s another way to think about it that lets you realize that it’s even deeper than that. It’s not just the simple fact of intertextuality that you’re talking about. It’s different. Recognizing that text is intertext is one thing. Seeing that a text is a social space is another. It’s a deeper way of looking at it. To say that it’s a social space is to say that stuff is going on: people, things, are meeting there and interacting, rubbing off one another, brushing against one another – and you enter into that social space, to try to be part of it. So, what I guess I’m trying to say is that the terms are important insofar as they allow you, or invite you, or propel you, or require you, to enter into that social space. But once you enter into that social space, terms are just one part of it, and there’s other stuff too. There are things to do, places to go, and people to see in reading and writing – and it’s about maybe even trying to figure out some kind of ethically responsible way to be in that world with other things.

Our first collaborations were in poetry. That’s basically the better way to put it. All of that other stuff that I was just saying which made no sense: strike that! We’ve been thinking about stuff to do. Hanging around, talking, and drinking. Eventually things deteriorated to the point where we were writing something. But the collaboration is way older than the production of any text. The first thing we wrote together, “Doing Academic Labor,” was in 90-something. I don’t know. But there were fifteen years of hanging out together before we published something. Hopefully, when the last thing gets published, we’ll have fifteen more years of hanging out together after that.

STEFANO: And then the next publication... [laughs]. The one thing that I was thinking about as you were talking about the text being a social space is it's exciting for me when we get to that point where the text is open enough that instead of being studied, it actually becomes the occasion for study. So, we enter into the social world of study, which is one in which you start to lose track of your debts and begin to see that the whole point is to lose track of them and just build them in a way that allows for everyone to feel that she or he can contribute or not contribute to being in a space. That seems to me to be not about saying there's no longer somebody who might have insisted or persisted in getting us into that time-space of study, but rather that the text is one way for that kind of insistence on study to be an open insistence, to be one that doesn't have to be about authority or ongoing leadership or anything like that, but a kind of invitation for other people to pick stuff up. I've been thinking more and more of study as something not where everybody dissolves into the student, but where people sort of take turns doing things for each other or for the others, and where you allow yourself to be possessed by others as they do something. That also is a kind of dispossession of what you might otherwise have been holding onto, and that possession is released in a certain way voluntarily, and then some other possession occurs by others.

I think that this notion also applies in the social space of the text itself, even where the study is not yet apparent. If you think about the way we read a text, we come in and out of it at certain moments, and those moments of possession are, for me, opportunities to say, well, how could this become more generalized? This sense of dispossession, and possession by the dispossessed is a way to think what Fred and I call the general antagonism, which is a concept that runs through all our work, as it runs through our sense of the world. The riotous production of difference which is the general antagonism cannot be tamed either by the feudal authority or social violence that is capitalism much less by policy initiatives like agonistic dialogues or alternative public spheres. But where the aim is not to suppress the general antagonism but to experiment with its informal capacity, that place is the undercommons or rather, wherever and whenever that

STEFANO: For me, when I use the term 'abolition,' I mean it precisely in the opposite way. For me, abolition is both about a kind of acknowledgement that, as Fred says, there's no repairing or paying back the debt, so you couldn't really have anything like an abolition of debt. I mean, you could have debt forgiveness, but I would never use the term 'abolition' for that meaning. And, secondly, there's a whole history of debt that is not that history of debt, which doesn't need to be forgiven, but needs to become activated as a principle of social life. It can become, and already is in many instances activated as something which, precisely as something that doesn't resolve itself into creditor and debtor, allows us to say, "I don't really know where I start and where I end." This is even my point around the debt between a parent and a child. If it's really a debt, then that debt that you have is for more than you, it's not just for you, it passes through you, but it was a generative form of affect between two beings that is precisely valuable because it continues in certain kinds of ways. There's a whole history there, and what abolition means in that case is the abolition of something like credit or measurability or attribution, in a certain way.

FRED: I think this is where that distinction Stefano made between credit and debt is crucial. I think what people may mean, when they talk about the abolition of debt, is the abolition of credit. But they probably don't even really mean that. What they probably technically mean is forgiveness, which is to say, "we'll forgive this loan. Now, if you get in debt again, we're gonna want to get paid, goddamnit." Whereas, what Stefano is talking about, I think and I concur, is an abolition of credit, of the system of credit, which is to say, maybe it's an abolition of accounting. It says that when we start to talk about our common resources, when we talk about what Marx means by wealth – the division of it, the accumulation of it, the privatization of it, and the accounting of it – all of that shit should be abolished. I mean, you can't count how much we owe one another. It's not countable. It doesn't even work that way. Matter of fact, it's so radical that it probably destabilizes the very social form or idea of 'one another.' But, that's what Édouard Glissant is leading us towards when he talks about what it is "to consent not to be a single being." And if you think

tearing shit up and building something new. My primary concern with it is not that they refuse to acknowledge this, although at the same time, their refusal to acknowledge other instances of a similar kind of thought, or a similar kind of social phenomena, does have a negative impact on the utility of what they do. So, that has to be taken into account as something that has material effects. But, in terms of just some desire for an acknowledgment, so that then Grace Lee or James Boggs or whoever, or the similar movements outside Detroit that some autonomists never really studied, can be noted... or, I think there's a kind of work that people want to do where it would be like, somebody might read George Lewis's book on AACM [Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians] and say, "well, this has to be understood in a general framework that associates it with the autonomist movement," or something like that – and that would be an important, maybe, intellectual connection to make, and somebody could make it, and I think that would be cool. But, the bottom line is I think a whole lot of that kind of work of acknowledging a debt intellectually is really predicated on a notion that somehow the black radical tradition is ennobled when we say that the autonomists picked something up from it. It's as if that makes it more valuable, whereas it doesn't need to be ennobled by its connections to autonomist thought. Rather, what's at stake is the possibility of a general movement that then gets fostered when we recognize these two more or less independent irruptions of a certain kind of radical social action and thinking.

STEPHEN: Thanks for that. The last thing I wanted to ask you, I think you've already started to answer in certain ways. At one point you write how "justice is only possible where debt never obliges, never demands, never equals credit... debts which aren't paid can't be paid." I was thinking about this, particularly in relation to the recent calls for debt abolition or a politics of debt that says, "no, we'll have to get rid of all of this debt." But to me it sounds like you have a sense of debt which can't be forgiven, can't be gotten rid of, and you wouldn't want to get rid of. So, I want to ask you, what's the relation between debt abolition and the debt that one would not want to get rid of?

experiment is going on within the general antagonism the undercommons is found. Being possessed by the dispossessed, and offering up possession through dispossession, is such an experiment and is, among other things, a way to think of love, and this too can arise in study. I think this is the kind of experiment we are attempting with the School for Study.

STEPHEN: Preparing for the interview I resorted to a typically web 2.0 approach of asking on Facebook what questions I should ask. I sent some of these to you. One question that seemed quite interesting was whether it was possible to be part of the undercommons and not study, or whether the undercommons includes, or could include, non-instructional university service workers and forms of affective labor which are not immediately pedagogical

FRED: A lot of the questions from people on Facebook were, 'how do you enter into the undercommons?': well, you know, the 'undercommons' is a box, and if you open it you can enter into our world. A couple of people seem to be reticent about the term 'study,' but is there a way to be in the undercommons that isn't intellectual? Is there a way of being intellectual that isn't social? When I think about the way we use the term 'study,' I think we are committed to the idea that study is what you do with other people. It's talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice. The notion of a rehearsal – being in a kind of workshop, playing in a band, in a jam session, or old men sitting on a porch, or people working together in a factory – there are these various modes of activity. The point of calling it 'study' is to mark that the incessant and irreversible intellectuality of these activities is already present. These activities aren't ennobled by the fact that we now say, "oh, if you did these things in a certain way, you could be said to be have been studying." To do these things is to be involved in a kind of common intellectual practice. What's important is to recognize that that has been the case – because that recognition allows you to access a whole, varied, alternative history of thought.

What I also want to say about that question is that it strikes me as being overly concerned with the rightness and legitimacy of the term. It's not so much that I want to say, 'oh, he or she didn't understand what we meant by study.' It's more like, 'okay, well, if that terms bothers you, you can use another term.' You can say, 'my understanding of study doesn't work for what it is that I think I want to get from what you guys are saying.' So, that person then has to have some kind of complicated paleonymic relation to that term. They have to situate themselves in some kind of appositional relation to that term; they have to take some of it, take something from it, and make their own way away from it. Insofar as you are now in what might be called a dissident relation, you are precisely involved in what it is that I think of as study.

So if the question is, 'does it have to include 'study?'', my first response is: okay, you don't understand what we mean by study. And then my second response is: but it's okay that you don't understand what we mean by study, because you're going to do something else now. So, my first response was to be correct and say, 'by study we mean this. The thing that I think that you want from what we're saying is precisely what it is that we mean by study.' And I'm gonna say, 'you seem to have a problem with study. How can you have a problem with study? If you truly understood what study is, you would know that it is this sort of sociality. That's all that it is.' But, then I would say, I'm being an asshole. That's sort of taking this guy to task for not having a properly reverent, adequate understanding of the term – and what I'm saying is that it's precisely his misunderstanding of, his active refusal to understand, the term that is an extension of study. Just keep pushing it. I will always think of his or her tendency to want to avoid or to disavow study as an act of study. But, if he or she doesn't think about it that way, that's okay.

STEFANO: At the same time, I'm happy for us to say more about *study*. I don't think it's a question of being completely passive about it and saying, 'do what you want.' There are reasons why we felt that we had to pursue these terms, and one of the key reasons – which Fred has already talked about – is our feeling that it was important to stress

people want when they want reparations is in fact an acknowledgment, and they want an acknowledgement of the debt because it constitutes something like a form of recognition, and that becomes very problematic because the form of recognition that they want is within an already existing system. They want to be recognized by sovereignty as sovereign, in a certain sense. So, basically, I can read a big old book on the history of Western Marxism, and I can be alternatively pissed off about the way that its author can write that history without writing about CLR James. I'm alternatively pissed off, bemused, feel pity for his ignorant ass, whatever. You start to feel pity for his ignorant butt, but then you also understand the deep structural connections between ignorance and arrogance. And you can't feel sorry for an ignorant motherfucker if he's also an arrogant motherfucker, so then you get mad again. You stay mad, actually. But this is not a personal injury. You have to step to it in a different way.

So, basically, I'm with Stefano on this, which is that I feel like I want to be part of another project. Which is to say I'm not acceding to the fact; it's not like I'm just trying to turn my eye from it. I don't want to accept in silence without protest all the different forms of inequality and exploitation that emerge as a function of the theft and of the failure to acknowledge the debt. It's not just that I'm pissed off that Willie Dixon never got paid the way he was supposed to get paid for all them songs that Plant and Jimmy Page stole, but also that I want him or his locked-up grandson to get the damn money. I'm not sitting here saying, "I'm above them getting the money." I don't believe that what has happened in general is repairable, but if the United States finally decided to write me a check, I would cash the check and put it in the bank or go buy something stupid with it, a Rolls Royce or a Bentley, something that will really make George Stephanopoulos mad. I would accept the check, and be pissed off that it ain't as much as it should be. But I also know that what it is that is supposed to be repaired is irreparable. It can't be repaired. The only thing we can do is tear this shit down completely and build something new.

So, I'm interested in the autonomist tradition insofar as they've got something useful to say about the possibility and practicality of

it's always trying to get rid of. It stands against vanguardism, but it's always about, "who's really doing it and who's not really doing it?" It's still caught up with the idea that in order to be autonomous you need to be doing politics, and then there's the persistent risk of a definition of who's doing politics and who's not that's always at work. This is even in the Gambino pieces. For as good as they are, he's constantly looking for where DuBois or Malcolm X intersect with real politics, in my opinion. And yet as Matteo Pasquinelli points out, the impulse: "if difference, then resistance" is at the core of "Italian theory" and at its best this attention to what we would call the general antagonism is what this tradition shares with the impossible but actually existing tradition of black radical thought.

FRED: I defer to what Stefano said. I don't have that much to say about it. There's a very important, and let's call it righteous strain, of Afro-American and Afro-Diasporic studies that we could place under the rubric of debt collection. And it's basically like, "we did this and we did that, and you continue not to acknowledge it. You continue to mis-name it. You continue to violently misunderstand it. And I'm going to correct the record and collect this debt." And there's a political component to it, too. Maybe that's partly what the logic of reparations is about. Or even the "I have a Dream" speech, he's like 'we came here today to cash a check. A promise was given. We came to collect.' That's what King said. So, I don't disavow that rhetoric or even that project. And, in many ways, I'm a beneficiary of that project, in ways that are totally undeniable and I don't want to deny.

I also think that that project is not the project of black radicalism – which is not about debt collection or reparation. It's about a complete overturning – again, as Fanon would say, and others have said. If that's your concern, if that's your project, the mechanisms of debt collection become less urgent. Or they become something that one is concerned about, but in a different way. Like, "I will note the debt, and I will note the brutal and venal and vicious way in which the debt is unacknowledged." When we talk about debt, to talk about the unpayability of debt is not to fail to acknowledge the debt. But, certain mugs just refuse even to acknowledge the debt. And I think a whole lot of what

that study is already going on, including when you walk into a classroom and before you think you start a class, by the way. This is equally the case with planning. Think of the way we use *'policy,'* as something like thinking for others, both because you think others can't think and also because you somehow think that you can think, which is the other part of thinking that there's something wrong with someone else – thinking that you've fixed yourself somehow, and therefore that gives you the right to say someone else needs fixing. *Planning* is the opposite of that, it's to say, "look, it's not that people aren't thinking for themselves, acting for themselves together in concert in these different ways. It just appears that way for you because you've corrected yourself in this particular way in which they will always look wrong for you and where therefore you try to deploy policy against them." The very deployment of policy is the biggest symptom that there's something you're not getting in thinking that you need to do that – and it seems to me, really, the same with study. I think it's also fine for people not to use it or to find something else. But, equally, I think that the point about study is that intellectual life is already at work around us. When I think of study, I'm as likely to think about nurses in the smoking room as I am about the university. I mean it really doesn't have anything to do with the university to me, other than that, as Laura Harris says, the university is this incredible gathering of resources. So, when you're thinking, it's nice to have books.

FRED: Of course the smoking room is an incredible gathering of resources too.

STEFANO: Yes. So, I just don't think of study and the university with that kind of connection – even though originally we were writing about what we knew, and that's why the undercommons first came out in relationship to the university. I don't see the undercommons as having any necessary relationship to the university. And, given the fact that, to me, the undercommons is a kind of comportment or ongoing experiment with and as the *general antagonism*, a kind of way of being with others, it's almost impossible that it could be matched up with particular forms of institutional life. It would obviously be cut though in different kinds of ways and in different spaces and times.

FRED: Studying is not limited to the university. It's not held or contained within the university. Study has a relation to the university, but only insofar as the university is not necessarily excluded from the undercommons that it tries so hard to exclude.

STEPHEN: The particular question you're responding to was asked by Zach Schwartz-Weinstein on the history of non-instructional academic labor, which brings me to what I wanted to ask. I understand there's a much broader and deeper understanding of study that you're working on. But, your work started in the 1990s by looking at particular conditions of academic labor. So this is a question about how the broader conception of study fits into the more specific conditions of academic labor you're talking about. You're talking about how certain kinds of academic labor pre-empt collectivity or, almost because they encourage a very individualistic investment in the labor, they pre-empt that sort of broader project from emerging. So, is this something that is very particular to academic labor or is this something that is more general to forms of labor that require this investment? I guess my question is: how do you understand the relation between the specific forms of class composition of academic labor and broader patterns? I think it's easy for the specific to be conflated with the more general kind.

FRED: When I think now about the question or problem of academic labor, I think about it in this way: that part of what I'm interested in is how the conditions of academic labor have become uncondusive to study – how the conditions under which academic laborers labor actually preclude or prevent study, make study difficult if not impossible. When I was involved in labor organizing as a graduate student, with the Association of Graduate Student Employees at the University of California Berkeley I was frustrated with the way that sometimes graduate student investment in thinking about themselves as workers was predicated on the notion that workers don't study. But this was more than just a romanticisation of authentic work and a disavowal of our own 'inauthenticity' as workers. It was that our image of ourselves as academic laborers actually acceded to the ways in which the conditions of academic labor prevented study. We actually

the moral judgment on the man. But also the other kind of debt, you know: I owe everything to my mother, I owe everything to my mentor. That stuff also becomes very quickly oppressive and very moralistic. There has to be a way in which there can be elaborations of unpayable debt that don't always return to an individualisation through the family or an individualisation through the wage laborer, but instead the debt becomes a principle of elaboration. And therefore it's not that you wouldn't owe people in something like an economy, or you wouldn't owe your mother, but that the word 'owe' would disappear and it would become some other word, it would be a more generative word.

I know that too many Italian autonomists never paid sufficient attention to the black radical tradition, and I know that that's continued up to the present to some extent. What I'm more interested in right now is the opportunity to place this vital strand of European experiment within a more global history. So, now certain autonomist stuff is sort of popping up in India. If it comes to India as if it came from Europe, as if it were an import rather than a version of something, then the first thing we're going to lose is an entire history, that I, for instance, don't know enough about, of autonomist thinking and movement in India, from India. So, it's not so much about giving credit to something, as it is of seeing this or that instance of something much broader. I'm not as interested in correcting genealogical lines, as I am in seeing European autonomism as an instance of something, and others can put it in whatever global context they want but for me it's an instance of the black radical tradition, an general inheritance of the shipped, the impossible tradition of those without tradition, an experimental social poesis.

STEPHEN: I was sort of asking, not to say "oh well look what's missed, how bad it is that they've missed it," but more I'm intrigued by the particular ways of missing it. Autonomia seems to render blackness in a very Leninist way. So, we care about Detroit and nowhere else.

STEFANO: Yeah. Well, in that sense it also has an unfortunate tendency to reflect itself. Autonomia has a problem of vanguardism that

were – and to try to take more fully into account the necessity of understanding what your own conditions are. So, let's say that in some ways, the academic labor writings represented attempts at location and locating, mapping some sort of terrain that you were within. And I think the later stuff is much more interested in trying to achieve a kind of dislocation and a kind of dispersion – and, therefore, it claims a certain mobility. I agree with Stefano, well I don't know if we had to do that, but that's where we got started. We could have got started in another way.

STEFANO: Yeah, in a way, the undercommons is a kind of break piece, between locating ourselves and dislocating ourselves. What's so enduring for us about the undercommons concept is that's what it continues to do when it is encountered in new circumstances. People always say, "well, where the fuck is that." Even if you do that clever Marxist thing like, "oh it's not a place, it's a relation," people are like, "yeah, but where's the relation." It has a continuing effect as a dislocation, and it always makes people feel a little uncomfortable about the commons. For me it was like the first freight that we hopped.

FRED: Yeah, it's a dislocation. As our old friend Bubba Lopez would say, we started riding the blinds.

DEBT, CREDIT, AUTONOMY

STEVPHEN: Another area I wanted to ask about is your relationship to autonomism: How do you draw from post-workerism, in particular how it overlaps with the black radical tradition? Or more particularly the way that these overlaps and connections are passed over and ignored?

STEFANO: I'm not interested so much in the relationship where the debt would have to be credited, because increasingly for me I see the dominance of these two forms of debt in life, and they're both so baleful, they're both so moralistic. You know, as Marx said, debt is

signed on to the prevention of study as a social activity even while we were engaging in, and enjoying, organizing as a social activity. It's like we were organizing for the right to more fully embed ourselves in isolation. It never felt like we studied (in) the way we organized, and we never approached a whole bunch of other modes of study that were either too much on the surface of, or too far underneath, the university. I think we never recognized that the most insidious, vicious, brutal aspect of the conditions of our labor was that it regulated and suppressed study.

STEFANO: Yes that was one side of what was bothering us. The other side of it was that it looked like the university – and the way that one worked in the university – was where study was supposed to happen. So, it meant that, on the one hand, you had some graduate students appearing to disavow study and, on the other hand, you had many academics who claimed to be monopolizing study or to be at the heart of study – and this for me meant that, first of all, study itself was becoming, as Fred says, almost impossible in the university. It was the one thing you couldn't do in the university not only because of people's various positions but also because of the administration of the university. But, secondly, it meant that it was impossible to recognize or acknowledge this incredible history of study that goes on beyond the university.

That said, probably there was something – I don't know about for Fred, but I needed to work through a little bit – that I was an academic worker and I needed to position myself in a way that moved beyond its restrictions. But the other thing was that there are certain ways in which that academic model of preventing study has been generalized. So, it's no longer just in the university that study is prevented. Because the one true knowledge transfer from the university has been its peculiar labor process. They successfully managed to transfer the academic labor process to the private firm, so that everybody thinks that they're an academic, everybody thinks that they're a student – so, these kind of twenty-four hour identities. People propose the model of the artist or entrepreneur but no, this is too individual, capitalism still has a labor process. The university is a kind of factory line,

a kind of labor process perfect for reintroducing a version of absolute surplus value back into the work day by trying to fashion work into this model which we associate with the university. And when we look closely at what was really going on in the university, what was really transferred was everything but study, the whole labor regime and all the organizational algorithms dedicated to closing down study while performing intellectual work. So, the other reason to stay within the university is not just for a certain set of resources or because the teaching space is still relatively if unevenly open, and not just because somehow study still goes on in its undercommons, but because there is this peculiar labor process model there that's being exported, that's being generalized in so-called creative industries and other places, and which is deployed expertly against study. This is something Paolo Do has tracked in Asia where the expansion of the university means an expansion of this baleful labor process into society.

STEPHEN: There's this argument put forth by the Precarious Workers Brigade and the Artworkers Coalition that what's interesting about artistic labor is not necessarily innate to itself but how it's a laboratory for a particular kind of extraction of value, which can then be generalized beyond the art sphere.

STEFANO: Yeah, exactly. I've learned a lot from them.

STEPHEN: Connected to another point you make, when we start talking about "students as co-workers," would that be to sort of disavow the disavowal of study? In your previous writing on academic labor you talk about how academics cannot acknowledge their students as co-workers because this would pose a problem. So, what would it mean to acknowledge that co-laboring process, not just within the university itself but more generally?

STEFANO: I might not put that the same way today as we were putting it at that time. I felt like we were involved more in an internal critique around academic labor than I feel connected to now. It's not that I'd be running away from it, but I sort of felt we needed to do it so that we didn't feel like we needed to keep doing it. Instead of

rather than teaching them, and when I say "for," I mean studying with people in service of a project, which in this case I think we could just say is more study. So, that with and for, the reason we move into more autonomous situations is that it grows, and we spend less time in the antagonism of within and against.

Some people love the productivity of the antagonism. Personally, I don't say it's not productive, but the further I get to the with and for, the happier I am. But that's a challenge, to remember that and to do it, and to learn how to do it, if you spend a lot of time in the within and against, as we did. I'm only saying this to say, if I watch the migration of the Queen Mary collective project from the within and against towards the with and for that's available to us by becoming this kind of School for Study that we're talking about now, we have to study how to do that. We don't necessarily know how to do that, and we're still trying to figure out how to do that, because we've been inside so much. It's not that you ever leave the within and against – I don't care how far you squat. Obviously, there's a shift in what becomes possible and where you can put your attention in different circumstances.

STEPHEN: Perhaps that's why the work both of you did of analyzing academic labor within a given position is necessary for the leaving, so when you leave you don't bring some of the things with you.

STEFANO: Well, at the personal level, and I started this morning saying this, and I still think it's true hours later, I had to go through that academic labor shit, especially with Fred, in order to free myself in a million different ways, including getting more into this autonomous stuff. I only feel now that that's had a full effect, that I can think free of all the shit that was in me through the labor process I was, and remain, immersed in. The first thing I made everyday when I went to university was myself, and the university these days is not necessarily the best place to make yourself.

FRED: I agree with that too. We were talking about how it was a way for us to understand who we were, and what was going on where we

state, which is a set of apparatuses and institutions which wield coercive power.

STEPHEN: Agreed on that. Another thing I want to ask you about is, over the past few years there's been another revival or proliferation of kinds of alternative education projects, things like Edu-factory to free schools and all sorts of free universities. What they all were struck by is sort of, when you leave the institution, why do people want to imagine what they're doing in terms of the institution anyways? The limit of the conception of collectivity is another institution.

STEFANO: Yeah, I've been struggling with this myself, as I've been doing elaborations on a proposal for the School for Study that we're thinking about doing in France. The first three times I did it, I was putting in all kinds of shit that didn't really need to be there – that was a kind of recapitulation of the university in ways that didn't have to happen. It was only in the last version, really after Denise had looked at it and said, “why is all this other stuff in here? What you're really interested in is study, so why not just have it be a forum for study?” And that's when the name changed and that's when we began to click on what we were gonna try to do with it. And it's absolutely the case that, when you think you're exiting the university, you're not. You're taking all this shit with you.

But also, Matteo Mandarini gave us this very interesting phrase. Tronti has this phrase where he says, “I work within and against the institution.” So, the Queen Mary project was this within and against the institution project. But it's also been elaborated in Precarious Ring stuff and other places as something that would also be known through co-research, something like “within and for.” So, the within and against gets cut with a kind of within and for. When you move further out into an autonomous setting, where you get some free space and free time a little more easily, then, what you have to attend to is the shift, for me, between the within and against – which when you're deep in the institution you spend a lot of time on it – and the with and for. And that changes a lot of shit. All those things are always in play. When I say “with and for,” I mean studying with people

putting it that way, I might say, there's a kind of fear in the university around something like amateurism – immaturity, pre-maturity, not graduating, not being ready somehow – and the student represents that at certain moments. And supposedly our job with the student is to help them overcome this so they can get credits and graduate. Today it's sort of that moment that's more interesting to me, because that's a moment where your pre-maturity, your immaturity, your not-being-ready, is also kind of an openness to being affected by others, dispossessed and possessed by others. But, of course, in the university, what they're trying to do is get rid of that, so you can be a fully self-determined individual ready for work, or as Paolo Virno says, ready to display that you are ready for work. So, to me, it's less about the student as co-worker, though it's undoubtedly true that students do a lot of the work, and much more about the student, as Denise Ferreira da Silva would say, as an example of an affected body. And of course the professors, just like the philosophers that Denise is talking about, freak out at that student, while at the same time it's the thing they work on, it's a necessary point in the production cycle for them. They're trying to remove anything that feels like that kind of affection between bodies and to produce self-determined individuals. Entering with the student into that moment, at that affective level, is the part that interests me a bit more now than, say, engaging with them as the worker, though I don't think that's wrong. It just seems to me less than what could happen.

FRED: I think, looking back at those earlier pieces, that we just kept pushing ahead, and kept moving, but that the movement was predicated on us trying to think about where we were at the time. These are the conditions under which we live and operate, and we need to try to think about that. There's something wrong going on, let's think about how it is and why it is that things aren't the way we'd like them to be – and we just basically had the temerity to believe that our desire for some other mode of being in the world had to be connected to our attempt to understand the way that we were living and the conditions under which we were living at that moment. In other words, and to me this is a kind of crucial thing: I wasn't thinking about trying to help somebody. I wasn't thinking about the university as a kind

of exalted place in which being there is a mark of a certain kind of privilege, and that the proper way to deal with or to acknowledge that privilege was to take this wisdom or to take these resources that I had access to and to try to distribute them in a more equitable way to the poor people who didn't have the relation to the university that we did. Me, I never thought about it that way. I was just always like: the university is fucked up. It's fucked up over here. Why is it fucked up? Why is it that shit ain't the way it should be here? Yeah, there's some stuff here, but obviously there's stuff in other places too. The point is: it's fucked up here, how can we think about it in a way to help us organize ourselves to make it better here? We were trying to understand this problematic of our own alienation from our capacity to study – the exploitation of our capacity to study that was manifest as a set of academic products. That's what we were trying to understand. And it struck us that this is what workers who are also thinkers have always been trying to understand. How come we can't be together and think together in a way that feels good, the way it should feel good? For most of our colleagues and students, however much you want to blur that distinction, that question is the hardest question to get people to consider. Everybody is pissed off all the time and feels bad, but very seldom do you enter into a conversation where people are going, "why is it that this doesn't feel good to us?" There are lots of people who are angry and who don't feel good, but it seems hard for people to ask, collectively, "why doesn't this feel good?" I love poetry, but why doesn't reading, thinking, and writing about poetry in this context feel good? To my mind, that's the question that we started trying to ask.

STEPHEN: It's especially hard to ask that question in England where the assumption is that everyone's miserable and very polite about it anyways.

FRED: But, that's the insidious thing, this naturalisation of misery, the belief that intellectual work requires alienation and immobility and that the ensuing pain and nausea is a kind of badge of honor, a kind of stripe you can apply to your academic robe or something. Enjoyment is suspect, untrustworthy, a mark of illegitimate privilege or of some kind of sissified refusal to look squarely into the fucked-up face of

that I will vote on every decision, that I will oversee, that I will be like Lenin's inspectors, coming in to make sure the state's doing what it wants? What kind of communism could there be where I could just allow some people to do some shit for me, at the level of scale, and at the same time those people would also at other moments allow me to be doing that kind of thing? So, in what ways are we practicing, when we're for a dispossession of ourselves and allowing ourselves to be possessed in certain other ways, allowing ourselves to consent not to be one, at a moment that also lets people act on us and through us, and doesn't constantly require us re-constituting ourselves, which I think is implied? And this is, I think, the anti-communism of Scott. Scott's smallness is about self-determined autonomy. When you're small and in resistance, you're always in control.

Now, it's not that then instead we go for the state, because obviously the state, despite the fact that, as I say, it's not the thing he thinks it is, but a whole series of different kinds of shit – its effects are basically bad in the end. But, I'm interested in the way in which what we're doing already is and can be completely complex, that it doesn't require some other step and that we need to practice something else. Autonomists get this all the time in Europe: critics are like, 'oh, it's fine, you guys can go off and do that together, but we've got a hydro-electric system to run here.' And they often fall for that, and then sometimes you'll hear the autonomists saying, 'what would it mean to build autonomist institutions?' And maybe I misunderstood them but I think you don't need to build an autonomist institution. You need to elaborate the principle of autonomy in a way in which you become even less of yourself; or you overflow yourself more than what you're doing right now. You just need to do more of the shit that you're doing right now, and that will produce the scale. So, that's what's interesting to me. I'm interested in the way in which a deepening of autonomy is a deepening, not just among few people, not just that intensity which I value, but also it's a deepening of scale and the potentials of scale.

FRED: Yes, I agree. I bring up scale, not to denigrate scale, but to say, we can't cede scale to the people who assume that scale is inseparable from the state, or from what they mean by the

monolith but it's very, very thoroughly aerated. There are all kinds of little holes and tunnels and ditches and highways and byways *through the state* that are being produced and maintained constantly by the people who are also at the same time doing this labor that ends in the production *of the state*. So, what is it that these folks are producing? Scott seems to refer to a monolith that is unbroken by and in the very process of its construction. He's one of the ones who gets us back to the point where we ask, what is it that we don't like about that monolith. Well, its coercive power or its power to police or its power to make policy or to foster the making of policy or its power to govern or to foster governance and governmentality. So, what is he talking about? I give him credit, or I believe, however anti-communist he is, I believe he's sincere in his antipathy towards the monolith. To the extent that it exists, I hate it, too.

But, then, there are other people on the left who have no antipathy towards the state at all. And then I think they mean, it's not some sort of monolithic mode of existence that we are all captured by and contained within at the level of our own affective relations to one another and our everyday practices – because I think that's part of what Scott means. But what they're basically saying is, “no, what I'm interested in is this thing that has a certain kind of coercive power, and rather than that coercive power being granted to some other mug, I want it to be granted to me because I'll do the right thing with it. And also the main reason is I not only believe that I would do the right thing with it but I also believe that the kinds of things that I want to do at the level of scale can only be done by way of some sort of state or state apparatuses.” So, their ploy is: “(a) I'll do it better and (b) I'm thinking about shit at the level of scale and you're just being silly and all you care about is these four people that you're talking to right now.” See?

STEFANO: I do see, and I'm also interested in this question of scale, because that's the side of the argument scale ends up on and who it ends up on and with. But, one of the things I'm interested in, in the history of communism, let's say, is: under what circumstances could I allow myself to be taken up and possessed by others, be in the hands of others, give up anything like a kind of sovereign self-determination

things which is, evidently, only something you can do in isolation. It's just about not being cut off like that; to study the general antagonism from within the general antagonism. My favorite movie is *The Shoes of the Fisherman* and I want to be like this character in it named Father Telemond. He believed in the world. Like Deleuze. I believe in the world and want to be in it. I want to be in it all the way to the end of it because I believe in another world in the world and I want to be in *that*. And I plan to stay a believer, like Curtis Mayfield. But that's beyond me, and even beyond me and Stefano, and out into the world, the other thing, the other world, the joyful noise of the scattered, scatted eschaton, the undercommon refusal of the academy of misery.

STEFANO: About seven years ago I moved from the US to the UK, from a university system where graduate students taught on an industrial scale, to a more semi-feudal system with a lot of precarious adjuncts instead. But then I got connected with comrades suffering through the Baronial systems of Italy and elsewhere in Southern Europe, and if they wanted to study they had to leave the university, at least strategically. That opened up another question for me, which was when you leave the university to study, in what way do you have to continue to recognize that you're not leaving the place of study and making a new place, but entering a whole other world where study is already going on beyond the university? I felt I ought to have some way to be able to see that world, to feel that world, to sense it, and to enter into it, to join the study already going on in different informal ways, unforming, informing ways. When I speak about a speculative practice, something I learnt by working with the performance artist Valentina Desideri, I am speaking about walking through study, and not just studying by walking with others. A speculative practice is study in movement for me, to walk with others and to talk about ideas, but also what to eat, an old movie, a passing dog, or a new love, is also to speak in the midst of something, to interrupt the other kinds of study that might be going on, or might have just paused, that we pass through, that we may even been invited to join, this study across bodies, across space, across things, this is study as a speculative practice, when the situated practice of a seminar room or squatted space moves out to encounter study in general.

STEPHEN: One thing that I asked Stefano last weekend, as I was reading the manuscript, is about the order of the chapters. Some of the pieces feel different when you change the order in which you read them, because you get a different sort of narrative arc, depending on where you start from and where you end up. I think part of what I'm realizing is that the project is less, say, "here's a coherent narrative that runs this way," but more sort of things which are put together and remain open and should be presented as sort of a collection that doesn't necessarily say, "our argument starts at one and ends at five." It's more of a collection of things which resonate with each other rather than having to develop sequentially.

STEFANO: Yeah, I feel that's true. What I think is that each one is a different way to get at a similar set of questions, to think about the general antagonism, to think about blackness, to think about the undercommons. I think the impulse for me and Fred is always to try and move towards the stuff that we like, and to move towards the mode of living that we like. We know that sometimes that involves moving through certain kinds of critique of what's holding us back. But, for me, each time, what's going on is that I'm trying to elaborate a different mode of living together with others, of being with others, not just with other people but with other things and other kinds of senses. At one point, for me anyway, I felt very strongly that this kind of policy world was emerging everywhere – and I wanted to talk with Fred about how to find our stuff again amidst all this kind of policy work in which everybody seemed from every spot at any moment to be making policy. I had this image in my head of a kind of return to a world in which every self-determined individual had the right to make brutal policy on the spot for every person who was not self-determined, which essentially is a colonial or slave situation – and the kind of ubiquity of policy, which all of a sudden, didn't emanate anymore just from government but from fucking policy shops in every university, and from independent policy shops, and from bloggers, etc. These policy people to me are like night riders. So, I felt at that moment it was necessary to deal with it in terms of, what would you say is going on that occasioned that kind of frenzied attack, this total mobilisation of the 'fixed'? What provoked this? That's why we ended

won't throw me in jail or doesn't throw people in jail all the time. I just don't like to start from that position.

STEPHEN: It sounds more like projecting sort of an accidental fetish character of the state that sees it as whole and coordinated and, of course, very sensible.

STEFANO: Yeah, and also, I think the fact that people work on an affective state – and there is a certain thing that goes on that doesn't maybe go on in private production, because you have some notion that you're producing the effect. Now, that's become more common everywhere else. So, there's been a kind of way in which, well, there used to be some idea that when you're working in productive industries you're producing stuff. Now of course everybody thinks they're producing effects everywhere they're working. So, also, it seems to me that a certain kind of distinction has broken down around that – and I think that's interesting. Also, I'm not against the production of effects. I don't think that it's bad that people should get together and imagine that they're producing something hard to see. It's just bad that they happen to imagine nation-states.

I guess that's my position on James Scott [laughs]. You know, I get enough shit for attacking James Scott. I really never give the guy a thought! I used to get criticised all the time when the *State Work* book came out, from my development studies friends because apparently I called him "an anti-communist," and that really made everybody berserk. But I just meant in the technical sense that he was against communism.

STEPHEN: In the technical sense! [laughs]

FRED: I'm actually asking the question now, because I want you to say something more, Stefano, about this, because I actually think it's important. For Scott, what is it that he thinks he means by the state? Because what you're saying, Stefano, is that there's this monolithic thing that appears to be the referent when people utter the word 'state.' And you're saying it's not monolithic at all, and not only is it not a

to understand the state except as an effect of certain kinds of labor. And, when I was involved with that kind of labor, there were all kinds of undercommons in the departments that I worked in. There was an underlabor. There was study going on all the time in government. And if government essentially produces effects of state in various ways, which seems to be what Tim Mitchell and some of the smarter guys around state theory think, then for me, it's not about being against or for the state, it's being about, as Tronti would say, within and against the state, but also with and for the undercommons of the state. So, I just don't line up on the side that there's a state, there's an economy, there's a society, even that there's state and capital in such a clear way. I have a much more, sort of, phenomenological, if I could use that word which I kind of hate, approach to the state. When you get close to it, there's all kinds of shit going on there. Most of it's bad. Most of the effects are bad. But, at the same time, some of the best study, some of the craziest undercommons people have been working in government agencies, local government agencies at the motor vehicle department.

I remember once going in; I remember me and my friend Pete, we tried to get a cover for *State Work*, my book about this stuff. We went into the big post office that they later closed in downtown Manhattan. It was in the days when the post office was just full of people actually working there, before the attacks of September 11, 2001 in New York. I went to the one in Durham very recently, actually, and it reminded me of what it used to be like in New York, before it was all securitized. It was only a few people but it was just like that: a big old post office. Everyone had their booth, and in lower Manhattan's post office behind almost every booth was a black or latina woman who had completely decorated the booth for herself. And it was full of, like, Mumia posters, pictures of kids, pictures of Michael Jackson, pictures of union stuff, everything. Every booth, so every time you went up, you got a different view. And I'm like, well, if these are the people who are supposed to be making an effect called the state, then, there's got to be an undercommons here too. So, it's not helpful for me to say I can do this and I will be invisible to the state. Or, I'm not making an appeal because the state will get me. That's not to say that the state

up talking about planning. But there's also a part where Fred is very directly able to address blackness in a piece. So, we were able to start with something that we were feeling was an elaboration of our mode of living, our inherited black radical tradition. Then, that piece ends up with a kind of caution around governance.

At least from my point of view, I'm always approaching Fred, hanging out with Fred, to say, we know that there are things we like, so how can we elaborate them this time, not just for each other but also for other people, to say to others let's keep fighting, keep doing our thing. So, it's true that it isn't an argument that builds. To me, it's picking up different toys to see if we can get back to what we're really interested in. Not to say that that doesn't change. I have a richer understanding of social life than I did a few years ago. When I started working with Fred, social life, to me, had a lot to do with friendship, and it had a lot to do with refusal – refusal to do certain kinds of things. And then gradually I got more and more interested in this term, 'preservation,' where I started to think about, "well, refusal's something that we do because of them, what do we do because of ourselves?" Recently, I've started to think more about elaborations of care and love. So, my social world is getting bigger with our work. But, each piece for me is still another way to come at what we love and what's keeping us from what we love. So, it isn't in that sense a scientific investigation that starts at one end and finishes at the other end.

FRED: It's funny, this ubiquity of policy making, the constant deputisation of academic laborers into the apparatuses of police power. And they are like night riders, paddy rollers, everybody's on patrol, trying to capture the ones who are trying to get out – especially themselves, trying to capture their own fugitivity. That's actually the first place at which policy is directed. I think that a huge part of it has to do simply with, let's call it, a certain reduction of intellectual life – to reduce study into critique, and then at the same time, a really, really horrific, brutal reduction of critique to debunking, which operates under the general assumption that naturalised academic misery loves company in its isolation, like some kind of warped communal alienation in which people are tied together not by blood or a common language

but by the bad feeling they compete over. And so, what ends up happening is you get a whole lot of people who, as Stefano was suggesting, spend a whole lot of time thinking about stuff that they don't want to do, thinking about stuff that they don't want to be, rather than beginning with, and acting out, what they want.

One of the people who wrote questions on Facebook is Dont Rhine who is part of a political/artistic collective called Ultra-red which I was lucky enough to be able to do something with a few weeks ago in New York. He was talking about the Mississippi Freedom Schools, and Ultra-red have been using the Freedom School curriculum as part of their performances. These are pedagogical performances. What they're engaged in is essentially a kind of mobile, itinerant practice of study that is situated around a certain set of protocols regarding the problematic and the possibilities of sound. What they're engaged in is this process which, to me, is totally interesting and a model for how one might be together with different people in the world, in different places. My point is that the Mississippi Freedom School curriculum asked a couple of questions of the people who were involved in it, both the students and the teachers. One question was: What do we not have that we need, what do we want or want to get? But the other question, which is, I think, prior to the first in some absolutely irreducible way, is what do we have that we want to keep? And of course there's a way of thinking about what was going on in Mississippi in 1964 that would be predicated on the notion that the last question you would ever consider to be relevant for people in that situation, for black folks in Mississippi in 1964, is what do they have that they want to keep? The presumption is that they were living a life of absolute deprivation – that they were nothing and had nothing, where nothing is understood in the standard way as signifying absence. What that second, but prior, question presupposes is (a) that they've got something that they want to keep, and (b) that not only do those people who were fucking them over not have everything, but that part of what we want to do is to organize ourselves around the principle that we don't want everything they have. Not only is a lot of the shit that they have bad, but so too is their very mode of having. We don't want that. We don't need that. We have to avoid that. And what I'm saying

STEFANO: Yeah, it didn't get there.

FRED: A few people started talking about, "let's occupy everything. Let's occupy everywhere" – and that's more in line. But, "we won't come to your house and bother you." If that's the best you can do, then that's cool too. It's better to bother someone to death than to die. But we can move past that too.

STEVPHEN: One other thing I wanted to ask: I think part of the reticence about demands is also about a certain discomfort with thinking about or relating to the state, and how to relate to the state. I'm gonna ask two or three questions here, so it might be a bit of a mess. Not to get too caught up on definitions, I'm trying to understand the difference between how you understand the undercommons as opposed to, say, infrapolitics, or things coming out from people like Tiqqun, talking about zones of opacity. How does this notion compare, particularly in relation to thinking about the state? One of the things I've been trying to push you on for several years, Stefano, is your sort of knee-jerk reaction to someone like James Scott. You say "James Scott" and he starts kicking!

FRED: His knee hasn't jerked in twelve years! I'd love to see your knee jerk!

STEVPHEN: My question has something to do with his take on the state, and particularly that which cannot be taken into the state. So, in a book like *Seeing Like a State*, there are certain things which the state can't figure out. It can't figure out infrapolitics, it's completely incomprehensible to it. My suspicion is that you'd say, "no, that's stupid. Of course it's taken an understanding of infrapolitics. It does all the time." Which is why I want to ask you about the difference between undercommons and infrapolitics, in relation to the state. I'm guessing you are less reticent about the role of the state.

STEFANO: Well, it's not that I'm less reticent. I'm less convinced that there's a thing called the state, because I used to work in it. Okay, government and state are not the same thing, but I've never been able

killing you, too, however much more softly, you stupid motherfucker, you know?” But, that position in which you have no place, no home, that you’re literally off center, off the track, unlocatable, I think it’s important. Again, I think that there’s something to be gained from that part of Fanon’s double alignment of the demand with neurosis. It’s sort of saying, basically, it’s like Malcolm X, when he’d be talking about the distinction between the house negro and the field negro. And the primary distinction that he’d make was that the field negro would be saying, “where can I get a better job than this? Where can I get a better house than this?” He was claiming the location that really wasn’t his, but what he was really claiming was the possibility of location. And Malcolm’s like, “No! I’ll be out in the field. Not only in the hope of something more, something other, than what you think you have but also because there’s something in the field; that even in deprivation, there’s an opening.”

STEFANO: Yeah, I think that’s also something I felt again in these London riots. It’s always that stuff about, “why are they fucking up their own neighborhood?” Of course part of it is they don’t own those neighborhoods. But part of it is also, like, “cuz there’s gotta be something better than home.”

FRED: It’s like that, what did that Home Secretary say? What are the causes of the riots? She was like, ‘shared criminality.’

STEFANO: She doesn’t know how close she was to the truth.

FRED: She’s ridiculous, and yet there’s something deep and kind of true about that. I think you can make a good case that human being in the world is, and should be, sheer criminality. Which also, first and foremost, implies that making laws is a criminal activity.

STEFANO: The jurisgenerative stuff...

FRED: Those kids were, basically, like, “fuck this.” And you’re right, if you’re implying that Occupy never got to that.

is that there is a kind of really sclerotic understanding of these problematics of having and not having, of privilege and under-privilege, that structures the university as a place where policy proliferates.

So, we began thinking about the university because we were there. And Stefano was saying, rightly I think, what we came to understand is that our attempt to understand the conditions under which we were working led us to recognize that those conditions were being farmed out, that those conditions were being proliferated all throughout the world – that the university was an *avant-garde* of policy making and a place where the ubiquity of policy was being modeled for other realms within the social world. And then, people were saying, “matter of fact, we can take a very sclerotic understanding of study, or let’s say, of knowledge production and knowledge acquisition, and that can be the center around which we organize the export of this whole process and problematic of policy making.” So that, yeah, now we’ll model the workplace on a free school classroom. You won’t have fixed, individual desks anymore. We’ll have round tables and people can do something that kinda seems like moving around, and we’ll say that we are concerned about your continuing education, and we want you to feel free to express ideas. What in fact people were doing was taking the kind of empty shell of what used to be called education and saying, “we can use this shell as a way of exporting the apparatus of policy all throughout the social world.” We realized that not only are we trying to understand what’s fucked up about our own situation, but we’re trying to understand how it is that the essential conditions of our own situation are being exported everywhere.

STEFANO: Yeah, that’s right. Policy is especially directed towards the poor, and one of the reasons for that is essentially because, as Fred was saying, the wealth of having without owning – which exists among the poor, which is not to say that the poor aren’t also poor – the social principle of having without ownership is ambivalent. On the one hand, obviously, capital wants that; that’s the whole intellectual property rights crap, of kind of keeping that stuff loose so people will be productive about it. But, on the other hand, it can’t really be abided in the long term, and I think that’s why you get this weird, what I call

this extreme neoliberalism, where you get a back-and-forth, in which, one moment there are vicious kind of drones against the poor, these night riders making policy from anywhere said to be fixed against anyone said to need fixing, and then the next minute, governance is deployed against the poor. And it has to do with the alternatives to ownership that I think are an inheritance of the poor, or a disinheritance of it, or something. You know bad cop, bad cop.

I feel there's a relation between policy and governance that's at work here. Both of them get generated in the university – not the university alone, they also get generated in NGOs and other places as well. But, it strikes me that with policy what you're often dealing with is somebody whose presumption is that they know the problem. With governance you're dealing more with a situation in which they imagine in the first instance that, rather than having to fix someone in order to extract from them, there's the possibility of a kind of direct extraction, and this is also what the field of logistics desires. In this sense, governance reminds me of the way Mario Tronti talks about the labor process. Tronti doesn't use the term 'labor process,' but he says, "look, the worker brings everything: the class relation, antagonism, sociality. The only thing capital brings is the labor process, they set it up." As Poulantzas says, they initiate it and control it. It seems to me that this is what governance is. Governance is merely the labor process. It's the least of everything but it's the organizational moment, the organizational resistance to what we are doing. And it's because it's the organizational moment that we're in – a situation where, for people who are involved in forms of organization, like a teacher, for instance, that you are much more immediately confronted, because of policy and governance and their ubiquity, with either being almost immediately the police or finding some other way to be with others. You are much more immediately forced to choose. That seems to me, also, to give a sense of why there's so much anxiety in the university, almost immediately; there's no hiding in an imagined liberal institution anymore. In these kinds of algorithmic institutions where nothing but a logistics of efficiency operates, you're very quickly either the police when you work in the university or you have to find some other way of being in the university. I think that's because of the reaction to

his theory of the special antagonism that structures black life in the administered world also offers this brilliant articulation of this desire for home – "I don't want to be a cosmic hobo" – which is necessary to any possible embrace of homelessness. Woody Guthrie was a cosmic hobo, Coltrane was a cosmic hobo, so even if I could be something other than a cosmic hobo, I think what I'm gonna do is embrace homelessness for the possibilities that it bears, hard as that is, hard as they are. Homelessness is hard, no doubt about it. But, home is harder. And it's harder on you, and it's harder on every-god-damn-body else too. I ain't so concerned, necessarily, about the travails of the settler. The horrible difficulties that the settler imposes upon himself are not my first concern, though in the end they are a real thing. It's the general "imposition of severalty," to use Theodore Roosevelt's evil terms, that I'm trying to think about and undermine. He knew that possessive individualism – that the self-possessed individual, was as dangerous to Native Americans as a pox-infested blanket. Civilisation, or more precisely civil society, with all its transformative hostility, was mobilized in the service of extinction, of disappearance. The shit is genocidal. Fuck a home in this world, if you think you have one.

STEFANO: Just like the people we went to school with or maybe some of your Duke students or indeed settlers of the globe generally.

FRED: Yeah, well, the ones who happily claim and embrace their own sense of themselves as privileged ain't my primary concern. I don't worry about them first. But, I would love it if they got to the point where they had the capacity to worry about themselves. Because then maybe we could talk. That's like that Fred Hampton shit: he'd be like, "white power to white people. Black power to black people." What I think he meant is, "look: the problematic of coalition is that coalition isn't something that emerges so that you can come help me, a maneuver that always gets traced back to your own interests. The coalition emerges out of your recognition that it's fucked up for you, in the same way that we've already recognized that it's fucked up for us. I don't need your help. I just need you to recognize that this shit is

the neurotic standpoint, in the neurotic habit, of the soloist. But the soloist is not one. Just like it was always about more than 'the right to vote' or the tastiness of the water that comes from this, as opposed to that, fountain.

STEFANO: And I think in part that's connected directly to being shipped, because it means that you unmoored from a standpoint. Once you're in all the circuits of capital, you're in every standpoint, and at that point, the demand becomes something of the future and the present, that has been realized and has yet to happen. So, it gets connected back up for me with what we were talking about earlier about hearing things and seeing things, and about the relationship between demand and prophecy, which again is totally bound up with having been shipped.

FRED: It's just like the stuff you were talking about: in another version of the shipped, of logisticality, Woody Guthrie is riding the blinds with folks who are one another's pillows. And you can segue from that immediately to "I ain't got no home anymore in this world." And you can segue from "I ain't got no home anymore in this world" to like Coltrane's *Ascension* or *Interstellar Space*, in which the musical form is all about the disruption, the making of new form, outside the notion of some kind of necessary structural return to a tonic. So, there's no tonal center. There's no home like that. The improvisations are unmoored in this way. And obviously this is also something that plays itself out in Arnold Schoenberg, or whatever. So, the point would be that, like, recognizing that the most adventurous and experimental aesthetics, where dissonance is emancipated, are hand-in-hand with the most fucked up, brutal, horrific experience of being simultaneously held and abandoned.

That double-edged logisticality, where the one who is shipped is also a smuggler, carrying something – and what he carries is, first and foremost, a kind of radical, non-locatability. The point is, there's a certain way of thinking about that impossibility of being located, of that exhaustion of location, that only can be understood as deprivation. So, like, by way of Frank Wilderson, who, when he elaborates

the growing forms of autonomy in social life, the reaction that takes the form of governance and policy. Academics are caught up in that. They have to confront the fact that there's no possibility that they can't choose sides.

STEVPHEN: I would ask then what other ways are there to respond to the seductiveness of governance? Or, what are your interests, what do you want? I'm thinking of the NGO world where you have this prospecting for immaterial labor, for interests in order to be governed. How do you find a response to that? The reason I look at it from the point of view of seductiveness is I know some of my friends, and myself, who have ended up in the academy or the NGO world because they were trying to avoid being drawn into a certain kind of labor process, so they thought of it as their escape. But, their escape just ended up being a different kind of prospecting, where they eventually got drawn into a different, almost deeper, more problematic form of labor.

STEFANO: Yeah, the meta-labor process that they got drawn into. The key thing with the NGOs – and this is to some extent true in the university, but not to the same degree, because of the strange figure of the teacher – the true ethos of the NGO is not to speak for a group that's not speaking, but to somehow provoke that group to speak for itself. It's all about, 'this group has to find its voice and speak up for itself against the dam, and this kind of thing.' On the one hand, you think, 'well, fuck, what else could you do? I mean, you've gotta fight the dam.' On the other hand, it does seem to me that you're asking people to call themselves into a certain form of identity. This is what Gayatri means by the first right being the right to refuse rights, I think. So, it seems to me that the NGO can often be a laboratory for trying to solicit from people, trying to prospect from people, certain ways that they have of being together, getting them to translate these for, ultimately, capital. I'm not a fan of this notion that we're going to be inscrutable or invisible to capital, or anything like that. But there are always elaborations of social life that are not comprehended or exploited by capital. Capital, in its agency, just doesn't get it, necessarily. Governance is a way to make it more legible to them in certain ways.

It's not because somebody is trying to be illegible. I think once you're trying to be illegible, you're already legible.

So, if you're asking me what to do in these kinds of circumstances, I agree it's a difficult question, and in practice I continue to teach in circumstances that also include some finishing of the student, giving them a mark and things like that. And I don't say that people should suddenly not do NGO work. But, I also feel that it's necessary for us to try to elaborate some other forms that don't take us through those political steps, that don't require becoming self-determining enough to have a voice and have interests – and to acknowledge that people don't need to have interests to be with each other. You don't have to start by saying, "I'm so-and-so, this is what I like to do." I mean, people don't have to relate to each other through fucking dating sites. You don't have to elaborate yourself as an individual to be with other people – and in fact it's a barrier to being with other people, as far as I can see.

FRED: I was thinking about something you said, Stefano, about how capital initiates, or provides a structure. And I wanted to say that I want to think a little bit more about this supposedly initiatory power that capital has. Because, I would say, what you're calling 'initiation,' is what I think of as 'calling the situation to order.'

STEFANO: Yeah, and then it flips a switch.

FRED: That's the way it works. And regarding the seductiveness of it, there are two ways to think about it. One is some kind of normative productivity that requires order, requires answering the call to order. Or another way to look at it would be that in order to be recognizable, you have to answer the call to order – and that the only genuine and authentic mode of living in the world is to be recognizable within the terms of order. But, it's kind of like that thing where you walk into class, you're the teacher and you get there a couple minutes early and there are people milling around and there's a conversation already going on, and some of them might be talking about stuff you might be talking about in class and some of them might be talking

perspective, or absence of perspective, of the delirious, the more and less than crazy. And what we're saying is we claim this, not just because it's against the grain of the normative, not just because it allows us to call for something in the future; we claim this because this is who we are and what we do right now. Now, Fanon doesn't say that in *Black Skin*, but I think he's approaching that by the time he gets cut off, basically. This is not simply to repress or forget the pitfalls of spontaneity or the problems of national consciousness; it is, precisely, to remember them and what sends them; to consider what moves at and in this interplay of study and an ever expanding sense of who and what we are. That Derridean 'who, we' is already active in Fanon's Algerian air – that open question of the human and its sound, which now we can take even further out into a general ecology or something like a Deleuzian 'plane of immanence.' And I think that you could project outward from Fanon's last work and then come back and get something out of that interplay of the neurotic and the demand that he is beginning to approach in the chapters on mental disorders and anti-colonial struggle in *Wretched of the Earth*, because he's recognizing that anti-colonial struggle is all bound up with the radical, sort of, non-normative form of cogitation, that it's gotta be, because it is, thought in another way. It's that shit that Shakespeare says: the lunatic, the lover, and the poet are of imagination all compact. Just edit it: the lunatic, the lover, and the anti-colonial guerilla, right?, are of imagination all compact. And that's an aesthetic formulation that Shakespeare's making. But it has massive social implications, which need to be drawn out, which in a certain sense Fanon is gesturing towards, something that we're associating with blackness and the undercommons, something he tries to reach, something we're trying to learn how to try to reach or reach for. But, what we understand as the social zone of blackness and the undercommons is the zone precisely in which you make that claim – so that the demand is a double-voiced thing, an enunciation in the interest of more than what it calls for. You are saying what you want, though what you want is more than what you say, at the same time that you are saying what you are while in the guise of what you are not. There's this other formulation of Baraka's that McPhee would have known as well: "The new black music is this: find the self, then kill it." That kinda thing gets said from

associates it with neurosis. In *Black Skin*, the neurotic is problematic – and it’s, I think, very much tied to, or gesturing towards, a certain understanding of black sociality as pathological and there’s nothing about that which Fanon wants to preserve, in *Black Skin*. In *Wretched of the Earth*, on the other hand, I think there’s a lot about it that he wants to preserve. At the same time neurosis is also the condition of the sovereign, the habitual attempt to regulate the general, generative disorder. What does it mean to call for disorder in the sovereign’s “native tongue?” How do you get to the ongoing evasion of natality which is where or what that call comes from or, more precisely, through? The path that is forged by negation and reversal doesn’t get you there or gets you to someplace other than that, some delusion of origin or home, someplace available to or by way of a movement of return. I think Fanon is always trying to move against the grain of this itinerary of return, this reversal of image or standpoint. But that’s why it’s so crucial to abide with the work of Césaire or Baraka or Samuel Delany so that you can understand that the various returns they seem to enact or compose are always more and less than that. Fanon understands that the very taking of an anti-colonial stance looks crazy, from a normative perspective. For me, first of all, that’s good. That’s something that’s worthwhile. In other words, what it’s about is, “I’m gonna claim this thing that looks crazy from your perspective.” But, of course, the problem, I think, with Fanon in *Black Skin*, is you can do this thing that looks crazy from the normative perspective, but of course in some complicated way there is no non-normative perspective. The non-normative is precisely the absence of a point of view, which is therefore why it can never be about preservation. Eventually, I believe, he comes to believe in the world, which is to say the other world, where we inhabit and maybe even cultivate this absence, this place which shows up here and now, in the sovereign’s space and time, as absence, darkness, death, things which are not (as John Donne would say).

And what I want to do is say, against the grain of Fanon but in a way that he allows and requires me to say, no, let’s look at this shit from our perspective, from the perspective of the ones who are relegated to the zone of the crazy or, to be more precise, I hope, from the absent

about something completely different – and at the same time, I’ve been thinking about something, either what we’ve been talking about in class or something completely different. My position, at that moment, what I am supposed to do is at a certain point become an instrument of governance. What I’m supposed to do is to call that class to order, which presupposes that there is no actual, already existing organization happening, that there’s no study happening before I got there, that there was no study happening, no planning happening. I’m calling it to order, and then something can happen – then knowledge can be produced. That’s the presumption.

It’s very hard. What’s totally interesting me is to just not call the class to order. And there’s a way in which you can think about this literally as a simple gesture at the level of a certain kind of performative, dramatic mode. You’re basically saying, let’s just see what happens if I don’t make that gesture of calling the class to order – just that little moment in which my tone of voice turns and becomes slightly more authoritative so that everyone will know that class has begun. What if I just say, ‘well, we’re here. Here we are now.’ Instead of announcing that class has begun, just acknowledge that class began. It seems like a simple gesture and not very important. But I think it’s really important. And I also think it’s important to acknowledge how hard it is not to do that. In other words, how hard it would be, on a consistent basis, not to issue the call to order – but also to recognize how important it would be, how interesting it might be, what new kinds of things might emerge out of the capacity to refuse to issue the call to order. In recognizing all kinds of other shit that could happen, see what happens when you refuse at that moment to become an instrument of governance, seeing how a certain kind of discomfort will occur. I’ve had students who will issue the call, as if there’s a power vacuum and somebody has to step in.

STEPHEN: Like George Orwell being pressured to shoot the elephant.

FRED: I get so annoyed with a certain kind of discourse around that kind of weird narcissism – that double-edged coin of the narcissism

of academic labor – in which you naturalise your misery on one side of the coin, and then on the other side of the coin, you completely accede to the notion of your absolute privilege. So, on the one hand, you wake up every day being miserable and saying, ‘this is the way it is.’ And on the other hand, you wake up every day saying, ‘look how privileged I am to be here. And look at all the poor people who aren’t privileged to be here.’ One of the deleterious, negative effects of that particular kind of narcissism is that it doesn’t acknowledge the ways in which one of the cool things about the university (I’m not saying this is the only place where this happens, but it is a place where this happens) is that every day that you go into your classroom, you have a chance not to issue the call to order, and then to see what happens. And the goddamn president of the university is not going to knock on your door talking about, ‘how come you didn’t issue the call to order?’

STEPHEN: Well, the funny thing for me personally was my attempt to not be in charge in that sense and instead to try to start from the questions of “why are we here? What are we doing here?”... Let’s say that in certain aspects they didn’t get so well, namely, that the university’s response was, “you’re incompetent! We’re gonna send you teacher training and show you how to issue calls to order.”

FRED: And again I don’t have the benefit that Stefano’s had of being in both academic systems, but I know that in the US they don’t come, the administration doesn’t come to my class. What I think we have here is a situation in which the presumption that the necessity of the call to order is so powerful that they can pretty much count on people issuing it. But they don’t have to check up on you. The presumption is that it’s so absolutely necessary and indispensable so why would you do anything else? Which is great, because they don’t check up on you. You can do something else. It’s not that kind of surveillance and sort of worker discipline and regulation in the sense of it being an externally imposed force. The tricky thing is that the notion is that you are your own policy maker; you are your own police force. Hopefully, we will have trained you properly so that you will know you have to issue the call to order. At that point you have to police yourself.

multiplicity and the multivocality of the demand? This was something that was also happening at that same moment in the music, so that the figure of the soloist was being displaced. Even if the soloist was, in a certain sense, only temporarily occupying a certain kind of sovereign position, the return to collective improvisational practices was sort of saying, “we are making a music which is complex enough and rich enough so that when you listen to it you are hearing multiple voices, multiply formed voices. We are sort of displacing the centrality of the soloist.” Or, another way to put it would be that, even within the figure of the soloist itself, there’s this exhaustion and augmentation of the instrument, this tingling of the saxophone – and this is something that you hear in McPhee’s playing on *Nation Time*. He was playing harmonics on the horn, so that the horn itself becomes something other than a single-line instrument; it becomes chordal, social. And that chordal playing shows up for us aurally as screams, as honks, as something that had been coded or denigrated as extra-musical – as noise rather than signal. So, what I’m trying to do is to consider this notion of the demand as an appeal, as a claim, where you’re not appealing to the state but appealing to one another. An appeal, in this delivery – you’re making all this sound, you’re making all this noise. You’re an ensemble, and that’s bound up with that notion of study and sociality that we’ve been talking about.

So, I want to say that I agree with everything you say about the call, but I guess I want to maintain or keep that word ‘demand,’ just because of the particular way that Fanon indexes it, because he talks about it in relation to the settler’s interested, regulative understanding of neurosis.

STEFANO: That part I like, but the part that I’m concerned with in Fanon is that the demand for him seems futuristic. And it seems to me that, when we were looking at the Panthers again, one of the things that seemed so cool about them is they had a revolutionary program that was partly about preservation. So, it was like a revolution in the present of already-existing black life.

FRED: Look, here’s the thing: you’re right. I like the fact that Fanon

of demand is that you speak with a kind of authority. The authority of the demand could be supplied by the state, insofar as you serve as an officer of the state, so that you have the state and its powers of violence and coercion behind you when you make the demand. But, there's also the notion of a claim or a demand in which the authority of the demand is from some kind of multiphonic delirium or fantasy that undermines the univocal authority of sovereignty. That's what I'm thinking of with regard to McPhee and his tone. You listen to that record. It's 1970. Coltrane died in '67, but he's still in the air everywhere. And his tone, which was a tone of appeal – 'appeal' is a cool word, 'appeal' as in to make an appeal but also peal; there was an urgent intensity to his sound, a stridency. So, what I'm trying to get at is there was this notion of the cacophony of the demand.

Folks who were basically saying "we don't want to make any demands" – there were two elements to it. One potential way of saying that we were resisting making the demand is to say that what we were really resisting was to make a request. We did not want to make a demand, because to make a demand is essentially to make a request, which is essentially then already to accede to the authority of the state to either grant or refuse your request, after the fact of having recognized your standing, your right to request, even though it is the source of your injury, even though your recognition by the state redoubles, rather than remedies, that injury. So, that's a kind of Wendy Brown formulation. Then, another version of it, I thought, had to do with the fact that the demand emerges from a certain kind of authority. The properly authorized and authoritative speech of a demand takes the form of a univocal, single speech. Essentially, a kind of sovereign speaker is now drowning out, or trying to collect within his own anthemetic speech, all these other kinds of speech. So, again, some single, univocal notion of the demand emerges, when in fact what you've got is a whole bunch of people making a whole bunch of demands, some of which are contradictory – and we wanted to maintain that sort of ana(n)themetic multiplicity, because that was the whole point.

What if authoritative speech is detached from the notion of a univocal speaker? What if authoritative speech is actually given in the

What I'm really trying to say is, I think, it's important to make a distinction between the capacity of capital, or the administration, to initiate, as opposed to their power to call to order. There's a difference. They don't initiate anything. In other words, the call to order is not in fact an initiation. If it's an initiation, it's an initiation in the sense of being initiated into a fraternity. It's a new beginning, let's say. It's a moment of some sort of strange, monstrous re-birth. It's literally being born-again into policy, or into governance. But there was something going on before that. And that initiatory moment is double-edged. You are starting something new, but you are also trying, in a radical, kind of brutal way to put an end to something – and the horrible part is it's a moment of colonisation: you're putting something to an end and you're also trying at that very same moment to declare that it was never there. "Not only am I going to stop you from doing this shit, but I'm going to convince you that you were never doing it."

STEFANO: Yeah, that's right. So, it's sort of within that context that I think both of us pose the question that's important to us. In other circumstances, Fred and I have talked about this by thinking about a certain kind of song, a soul song that you might get in Curtis Mayfield or in Marvin Gaye, where something's going on, let's call it the experiment with/in the general antagonism, and then the song starts. You can hear the audience, you can hear the crowd, and then he begins to sing or music begins to start. So, the thing that I'm interested in is, without calling something to order, how can you still sing? In the sense that not calling something to order is different from saying that there's nothing that you want to do with others, there's nothing that you want to start with others. We have our own versions of insistence or persistence in study.

FRED: Form is not the eradication of the informal. Form is what emerges from the informal. So, the classic example of that kind of song that you're talking about, Stefano, is "What's Going On?" by Marvin Gaye – and of course the title is already letting you know: goddamn it, something's going on! This song emerges out of the fact that something already was going on. Then, from a certain limited perspective, we recognize, there are these people milling around and

talking and greeting one another – and then, something that we recognize as music emerges from that. But then, if you think about it for half-a-damn-second, you say, “but the music was already playing.” Music was already being made. So, what emerges is not music in some general way, as opposed to the non-musical. What emerges is a form, out of something that we call informality. The informal is not the absence of form. It’s the thing that gives form. The informal is not formlessness. And what those folks are engaging in at the beginning of “What’s Going On?” is study. Now, when Marvin Gaye starts singing, that’s study too. It’s not study that emerges out of the absence of study. It’s an extension of study. And black popular music – I’m most familiar with things from the 1960s on – is just replete with that. That thing becomes something more than just what you would call a device – and it’s also very much bound up with the notion of the live album. The point is that it’s more than just a device. It’s more than just a trope. It’s almost like everybody has to, say, comb that moment into their recording practices, just to remind themselves, and to let you know, that this is where it is that music comes from. It didn’t come from nowhere. If it came from nowhere, if it came from nothing, it is basically trying to let you know that you need a new theory of nothing and a new theory of nowhere.

STEFANO: Yeah, and this is also all over rap music, which is always about saying, ‘this is where we live and here’s this sound.’

FRED: I told you, “this is how we do it.” My kids listen to some shit, and I’m trying not to be that way, but sometimes I’m like, “let me play y’all some good music.” If you listen to the Staple Singers’ “I’ll Take You There,” it’s got one little chorus, one little four-line quatrain, and then the whole middle of the song is just Mavis Staples telling the band to start playing. “Little Davie [the bassist] we need you now.” Then, her father, the great guitarist Roebuck ‘Pops’ Staples: she’s like, “daddy, daddy.” Then, the verse was like, “somebody, play your piano.” That’s the whole middle of the song. That’s the heart of the song. Not the damn lyrics. It’s her just saying, “play,” and they’re already playing. And that’s not a call to order. It’s an acknowledgement, and a celebration, of what was already happening.

there are indeed things that are not here. But I think the call, in the way I would understand it, the call, as in the call and response, the response is already there before the call goes out. You’re already in something.

To me, the call is what these guys were trying to say when they said, “but these are biopolitical demands,” or “this is a biopolitical politics,” which is to say, it’s neither a politics of requesting something from authority nor of demanding something despite authority. Rather some kind of demand was already being enacted, fulfilled in the call itself. I don’t think that was totally clear to me or maybe to some occupy people – maybe to some it was scary when it was clear; it was certainly scary to authority when it was clear. And it was, of course, most clear not in the occupy movement but, for me, in the London riots, because the London riots, which – and Fred has written beautifully on them elsewhere and here we talk about them as irruptions – of logisticality, that which gives rise to the capitalist science of logistics, and today in rampant form.” What’s interesting about these riots, and I’ve talked to kids about it, after the three days, and they all said the same thing: “for three days we ran London. For three days London was ours. For three days it worked according to how we wanted it to work.” And, basically, they didn’t demand anything. They just started. There was a call: come out and let’s just run the city for three days. Now, maybe they didn’t run it exactly in the way everybody would have run it if the call was fuller or different. And, of course, those kids have all received incredibly ridiculous jail sentences and everything else. Occupy has been nothing compared to that in respect to vicious state repression in the court system. I mean, not to minimise some of the violence against occupy people in the US. The riots were really a place where you saw this kind of call. So, to me it’s no surprise that the call through social media was what they criminalised most quickly.

FRED: I want to say something else about the demand. I still kinda want to hang on to that term. The reason I do is because, I certainly see the difference between request and call, I want to get back into the history of the word ‘demand,’ where it also means ‘to make a claim,’ and sometimes ‘to make a legal claim’ – and the whole notion

of a sovereign articulation, something that an “I” or a “we” would say. But what it is, really – what it is when people say shit like “What is it?” – is a relay of breath that comes from somewhere else, that seems like it comes out of nowhere. It’s easy not just to get the origin wrong but to get the whole thing wrong by thinking about it in terms of an origin. I don’t think McPhee is or means to be originary. Maybe there’s some secret way, opened up by some unique and secret word, to move through this constant organization and disorganization of the demand that takes the form-in-deformation of a single voice consenting to and calling for its multiplication and division. That claim that Fanon makes about the demand being neurotic, in an already existing conception of psychological order or normalcy or whatever – and that’s something that he says in *Black Skin* – is tied to the sort of recognition that an anti-colonial movement would necessarily be one that would tend toward complete disorder, total lysis. And the neurosis is tied, not just to the fact that from the standpoint of sovereignty, the demand for sovereignty’s destruction makes no sense but also to the fact that the demand is spoken in his crazy language, in the crazy costume of the one who thinks he is the one. So the point is that the call to order is a call for and from disorder. That’s where, I think, McPhee is coming from. If you listen you can hear where he’s coming from.

STEFANO: For me, with regard to the occupation movement, there were three things in play at once, which you might call the request, the demand, and the call. The request is basically the stuff that Wendy Brown is herself always so paranoid about: that one is making a request to authority and by making a request to authority one is therefore already implicating oneself. Sure, there were occupation people for whom when people were saying ‘demand’ what they were really hearing was ‘request’ – request to someone – “we want you to reform banking, we want you to do this.” Then, there’s the demand, which is non-negotiable, which is I think what Kathi Weeks is interested in. But then, a minute ago, you were talking about a call, a call to disorder, which is already an enactment, an ontological enactment of something. So, the demand is uncompromising, but it’s still in the realm of positing something that’s not there, which is fine because

STEPHEN: Or you have James Brown saying, “take it to the bridge.”

STEFANO: Yeah, and I think that’s why, for me, I can’t think in terms of a management of the common – because it seems like, to me, the first act of management is to imagine that what’s informal or what’s already going on requires some act to organize it, rather than to join it, rather than to find ways to experiment with this general antagonism. Also, I think that, for me, that’s why, when we’re talking about a kind of unsettling, what we’re talking about is joining something that’s already permanently unsettled, what’s shipped, against what’s being imposed on it. You’re absolutely right because Poulantzas, when he’s talking about initiation, all he’s saying, basically, is, “it’s 9am, turn the machines on.” I mean, there’s no way that could have been the beginning of anything meaningful, other than control.

STEPHEN: When you talk about ‘the prophetic organization,’ how do you mean ‘prophesy’ or ‘organization’ there? If you’re not just calling into being something that was not there, I’m trying to understand what the notion of prophetic would be in that sense. Is it calling into being that which is already in being?

STEFANO: For me, ‘prophetic’ and a lot of the terms that we’re using are just forms for me to enrich being, so that it doesn’t get flattened out into the way that it’s understood so often in politics. For me, it’s just a way to think about the already-existing enrichment of being, the already-social quality of time and space, which means that you can simultaneously be in more places, and be more than one, and that seeing things and hearing things is just a way of being with others. It means the standpoint of every standpoint and none as Fred and I say, the standpoint of the shipped, the *containerized*, the unsettled and unsettling.

FRED: What you just said seems right to me. It is definitely about seeing things and hearing things. It’s funny, because I’m happily surprised that we used the term prophetic; I’m happy that’s there now, because I associate that term so much with Cornel West. There were moments where I would have been pretty stridently against the use of

that term, probably because of the association with pragmatism that West asserts. But now I'm like, that term's cool, because it is about seeing things and hearing things. Another way to put it would be: you talk about being able to be in two places at the same time, but also to be able to be two times in the same place. In other words, it's very much bound up with the Jamesian notion of the future in the present – and classically, the prophet has access to both of those. The prophet is the one who tells the brutal truth, who has the capacity to see the absolute brutality of the already-existing and to point it out and to tell that truth, but also to see the other way, to see what it could be. That double-sense, that double-capacity: to see what's right in front of you and to see through that to what's up ahead of you. One of the ways in which academic labor has become sclerotic, let's say, is precisely because it imagines that the primary mode, specifically of a certain kind of left academic labor, is a kind of clear-eyed seeing of what's actually going on right now – and that the work is reducible to that. Or, another way to put it is that, insofar as that's what one conceives the work to be, one is only really doing the work when the work is absolutely in the absence of play, where play would be conceived of as pretending, as seeing what could be, as fantasy.

BEYOND & BELOW THE CALL TO ORDER

STEPHEN: I'd like to follow up on the question of issuing a call to order, and more particularly about not issuing the call to order. Let's take the album *Nation Time* by Joe McPhee as an example. In one sense it seems very much that McPhee is issuing a call to order, haranguing the audience into a set piece of call and response: "What time is it?" "Nation time." But in another sense whatever order gets set up through that call to order, if it is one, then quickly breaks down or mutates into something else through collective improvisation. Fred, this connects closely to how you describe blackness as something happening "in the break" – but I was wondering how one could at the same time be calling to order and calling to mutation, or to a break, or perhaps to a different kind of order.

FRED: The enunciation, of "nation time," when Amiri Baraka first sang it, when McPhee echoes and riffs off and reconfigures it, is, I always thought, really a kind of announcement of the international and, beyond and by way of that, the anti-national. Black nationalism, as an extension of Pan-Africanism – which is resistance to a given Africa from within Africa accurately seen as a venal, administrative and accumulative combination of collection and division – cuts the nation, it seems to me. I mean, it makes sense, to me, only as this richly internally differentiated resistance to the Westphalian imposition, which comes fully into its own as the simultaneous invention and destruction of Africa, as the brutal interplay between colonial viciousness and the organization of racial murder on a grand scale. What gets called national struggle, how it shows up in cultural assertion, and what shows up as an international against national oppression and the imposition of parochial brutality, is what Fanon is after – to critique but also to destroy and disintegrate the ground on which the settler stands, the standpoint from which the violence of coloniality and racism emanates. I don't think we're just making this up. I mean, I think what we're gesturing towards is real – this phenomenon in which the appeal to the nation is an anti-nationalism, in which the call to order is, in fact, a call to disorder, to complete lysis. I mean this is what your question is getting at, Stephen, and it seems to me that this is what we hear when we listen to that McPhee cut. And what's cool is the stridency and striation of his call and of the response to it. No purity of tone either in his horn or in his voice or in the voices of those who, for lack of a better term, respond; the soloist is already less and more than one and, like Cedric Robinson says in *The Terms of Order*, which is really this amazing and beautiful ode to disorder, the one who is said to have given the call is really an effect of a response that had anticipated him, that is the generative informality out of which his form emerges. They already know the answer to the question they sent him to ask. They already know what time it is and that combination of answer and question, that gathering in the break of all those already broken voices, is when music becomes a demand, takes the form of a demand, that shows up in the guise of a single voice or a national call. It's like a delirium (as Deleuze might say, by way of Hume) taking the form of, moving in the habit, putting on the habit,